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ABSTRACT

Research findings on and program design features of Project Head Start have apparently influenced the Reagan administration's decision to continue the funding of the program. Research appears to indicate that the intervention program has a lasting impact on participants. Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that program benefits can outweigh costs. The program, through eligibility requirements and other regulations, serves the truly needy and, through fiscal monitoring and on-site visits to assess compliance with regulations, avoids problems of waste and fraud. Further, there is some indirect evidence that Head Start may help to create an environment within which family members of Head Start children achieve greater independence from publicly supported programs. (Author/RH)

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"Why Head Start Avoided the Reagan Budget Ax"

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"There will be no cut in Project Head Start" announced President Reagan in his first state of the union address to the joint houses of Congress. In subsequent appearances before other groups, and in an interview with Walter Cronkite, he reiterated the promise that Head Start would be saved along with six other federally funded social programs that would make up a safety net*. Safety net programs would be those programs that would serve the truly needy of our society through which no one would be allowed to fall. Other members of the administration, including Secretary of Health and Human Services Schweiker assured Head Start workers and parents that "this administration actively supports the Head Start program with its long record of helping children achieve both short and long term gains". He promised to draft legislation which not only would extend the life of the program through 1984 but would increase the appropriation of the program to nearly a billion dollars in 1982. This legislation was accepted by Congress who, with little debate, passed into law the legislation that would insure the life of Head Start in 1982. Head Start is clearly a favorite of the Reagan administration and Congress. Although budget cuts were made in other programs that serve the poor, free school lunches, compensatory education, WIC, and day care, to name a few Head Start remained.

Head Start has not always had such a favored status. Since its creation in 1965 as one of Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" programs it has sustained attacks by each administration. President Nixon tried to destroy it, succeeding only in destroying Head Start's sponsor, OEO. More recently the Carter Administration proposed to cut back the program it not to eliminate it entirely.

Footnote:
The safety net programs as contained in the Administration's March 10th budget submission: Old Age and Survivor's Insurance (Social Security), Medicare, Veteran's pension and compensation benefits, SSI, free School lunches and Breakfasts, summer jobs for [illegible]h and Head Start -- the only education program for children.

Why then was the Head Start program exempted from President Reagan's budget ax?

Perhaps the answer lies in those characteristics that, by deduction, we can conclude that Head Start possesses. In his February address to a joint session of Congress, Mr. Reagan talked about a range of programs that were to be eliminated or cut in his efforts to balance the Federal budget. Through extrapolation we could conclude that programs that are worthy of refunding are those that exist for those who are truly needy and who do not have the resources to assist themselves. These programs would be Federally funded in such a way that they would not be duplicating efforts of other agencies. There would be efforts to target the services specifically to those who would be eligible and in this way avoid waste. There would be a low incidence of fraud among these programs. The program would yield tangible benefits that outweigh their costs. The program might even allow individuals to lessen their dependence on public assistance. In short, the program would demonstrate in a variety of ways that it works!

Using these criteria as an overlay, how does Head Start match-up? It works!

For some years, the Head Start program was generally perceived to be a program that didn't work. This perception was derived largely from a study in 1969 conducted by the Westinghouse Corporation and Ohio State University. This study claimed that I.Q. and school readiness gains by Head Start children were lost after a few years. Later re-analysis of the data used by Westinghouse researchers showed that Head Start children did improve substantially in cognitive and social functioning and in such areas as motivation for achievement, school readiness, and academic achievement. Later researchers pointed out that the real gains for Head Start children were in the areas of health

and nutrition. They also pointed to the gains of the parents of Head Start children who profited from the program. There are hundreds of documented cases of successes of parents of Head Start children who broke the poverty cycle and moved on to successful taxpaying lives.

A more recent series of research studies, performed under the supervision of Irving Lazar and Richard Darlington entitled "Lasting Effects After Pre-School" summarizes the findings of twelve research groups who independently conducted experimental pre-school intervention programs with children of low-income families. These studies, most of which took place in the early and mid-sixties were Head Start-like programs focusing on approximately 3,000 low-income pre-schoolers. Lazar, Darlington and their associates looked at the children who were participants in these programs ten to fifteen years later and attempted to determine whether and to what extent these pre-school intervention programs had any lasting impact on childrens lives. Lazar and his associates found that children who attended preschool programs were about half as likely as control children to be assigned to special education classes in the public schools they were attending. They were also less likely to be retained in grade (left back). They also found that those who attended the pre-school programs scored higher than control children, at least at the fourth grade level, in mathematics achievement.

This study was specifically cited by Secretary Schweiker as one of the reasons for the administration's support of the Head Start program.

Aside from educational gains Head Start has done other things for children. Since 1965, Head Start has provided health physicals, dental

care and mental health, nutrional and social services to over seven million children and their families in the United States and its territories. In 1981 alone, 378,500 children of whom close to 40,000 were handicapped, participated in Head Start. This represents close to 20% of the nations 3-5 year old population of children who are known to be living in impoverished conditions.

For many, if not most of these children, Head Start provided them with the chance to be examined by a physican, to see a dentist, to have a handicapping condition discovered early. In 1971, Dr. Gertrude Hunter reported that of all the children enrolled in summer or full year Head Start programs, 83% had received a physical examination by a physican. The majority had also been tested for exposure to tuberculosis, had their blood tested to determine if they were iron deficient, and were screened for hearing or vision problems. Most of these children would not have received this attention to their health needs if it were not for intervention of the Head Start program in their community.

A Program Yielding Tangible Benefits Outweighing its Costs

One of the 12 studies cited in "Lasting Effects After Pre-School" was the Perry Preschool Project. This project provided a thirteen hour a week educational program to preschool children of poor families extending over a one or two year period. The program included home visits with mothers of the children by project staff. Results of the experimental group were later matched with those of a control group of young children who had not participated in the program. One of the analyses conducted with this group attempted to determine the economic benefits of the program. The researchers estimated that the cost of two years of participation in the program, were $5,984*.

*In 1981, the average cost of providing two years of Head Start was approximately $4).00.

The project showed that a child that had participated in such a program was less likely to require special education services in his later school years. In this way an average of $3,353 (the difference between the costs of a conventional public school education and the cost of special education) was saved for each child. The researchers also projected the average increase in life time earnings for each child as $10,798 and computed the value of a mothers time. The latter assumed a mother was released from child care obligations, and was therefore able to acquire part time employment and made an estimated $668.00 per child. The totel economic benefit ascribed to a child's participation in the program was totaled at $14,819 compared with an initial investment of $5,984.00. The returns certainly out-weighted the costs - a 147% return on initial investment. The researchers also found that children who attended preschool programs later showed less tendency to display antisocial or delinquent behavior in or outside of school. Children were also more likely to hold jobs after school and were more likely to complete their high school education, attend college and be employed in higher paying jobs. These latter benefits were not quantified but it is clear that cost savings to the taxpayer would be considerable. A worthwhile study for other researchers would be a cost benefit analysis that shows the long term benefits of initial detection and treatment of health problems of young children in this or other such programs. Surely these children would be less likely to be dependent upon the publicly funded medicaid system as they moved into their adolescent, teen, or adult years.

It's Targeted to Serve the Truly Needy

In order for a child to qualify for Head Start a family must demonstrate that it is poor. They now demonstrate their poverty by showing that

they fall within Office of Management and Budget poverty guidelines which require, for example, that a family of four may not have a gross annual income of more than $8450.00. Those families that are receiving some form of public assistance (welfare) automatically qualify for the program. Ninety percent of enrolled children must fall into one of the above categories. There is a ten percent solution for those families who are not poor by government standards. Head Start allows up to ten percent "non-poor" families to enroll children into the program. It is possible then for children of the near or working poor or even the middle income classes to enroll a child in Head Start. Head Start was one of the first programs to officially encourage pre-school aged handicapped children to come into the program. It is often these children, the handicapped or the near poor, who are enrolled under this provision.

Administration officials also point to the fact that the Head Start program must be located in officially designated poverty target areas. These are geographical areas distributed throughout the country in which relatively large numbers of poor people are clustered. There are approximately twelve hundred and sixty Head Start programs located in two thousand poor communities throughout the Nation. Roughly 65% of the 376,000 children enrolled in Head Start are minority children with an additional 3% from migrant worker families. Since it is within these groups that we often find the poor, the administration cites these statistics as another example of how the program is targeted to reach the truly needy.

It Avoids Problems of Waste and Fraud

John Busa, Deputy Director of the Department of Health and Human Service's Administration for Children, Youth, and Families suggests a number of ways that the Administration has kept Head Start both "effective and ' st". Head Start grantees submit to an annual audit

of its funds by an independent outside accounting agency. Quarterly financial reports must also be submitted that account for the programs use of funds. Both documents are reviewed by government fiscal offices and on occasion become the basis for a delay in allotment of funds to the program and even criminal proceedings. Although programs have been closed down because of misuse or criminal use of funds, Mr. Busa feels that the incidence of this type of activity has been relatively low. In addition to the fiscal monitoring of a program, federal field representatives make on-side visits to head Start programs to determine if they are meeting prescribed performance standards. Programs, too, are required to perform annual self-assessments that are also subject to review. The latter uncover areas in which a program may be in need. Additional resources and/or training is then made available to programs found to be in need.

Officials also note that government regulations have a matching funds requirement. Local programs must work to "earn" federal dollars by matching them with cash or services upon which a cash value can be placed. Head Start also used the funds or services of other federal agencies. Last year, 90% of the programs applied for and received reimbursement for food and food services costs from the United States Department of Agriculture. Most medical costs particularly of the social service variety, were paid by local departments of social services.

Head Start Lessens a Family's Dependence on Public Assistance

Education Secretary Terrence Bell has been quoted as saying that Head Start "makes taxpayers out of taxeaters". Mr. Bell, himself an educator and an author of curriculum materials for pre-school programs, reportedly has been an outspoken proponent of Head Start in presidential cabinet meetings when the refunding of social programs

has been an issue.

In research that the author has conducted there is some indirect evidence that Head Start may help to create an environment within which family members of Head Start children achieve greater independence from publically supported programs. Head Start does place a premium on parent participation through its insistence that parents be members of policy making groups and serve as volunteers within Head Start centers. Parents often partake of training offerings and accept the advocacy of Head Start staff who work with them to improve the health, nutrition, and social service status of their family as earlier mentioned. The author once met a welfare mother and Head Start parent who was so imbued with confidence by her association with the program that she was beginning to rally support in her community to run for the United States Senate seat that was soon to be vacated in her home State. In interviews with Head Start parents, it became clear that Head Start helped them to better understand the needs of their children. The parents themselves began to learn more about ways to confront the problems created by their poverty and felt more comfortable about dealing with the various bureaucracies that govern their lives-including the public schools. Others, seeing what Head Start's educational programs could accomplish for their children sought out educational opportunities for themselves. Many completed high school equivalency programs and went on the acquire two and four year college degrees. It appears that many, through their own self development, were able to lessen their dependence on public assistance through a progression that began with their association with Head Start and ended with being employed, after some period of education or job training, in a job. Administration officials point to the fact that Head Start parents often become employees of the program. Although Head Start is not an employment program it does turn "taxeaters into taxpayers" in a very direct way.

Conclusion

In interviews with a variety of persons in government it became clear that Head Start is a very popular program. It's safe, non-threatening, enjoying popular support from administration and Congress alike. It has a national constituency, many of whom are minority members. This fact alone could be used by the administration to show that it is mindful of the needs of the poor, the blacks, hispanics, and migrant workers. However, administration officials questioned directly on the fate of Head Start in the 1983 budget said that no program is immune from budget cuts. Each day newspapers report the President's intention to cut the federal budget even further. Child advocates can draw little solace from Head Start's refunding when numerous other programs that cater to poor children or their families are to be cut or eliminated entirely.

Researchers, however, particularly Irving Lazar and his associates should feel pleased that the administrations stance on Head Start was directly influenced by their work. In interviews and in written documents supporting the administrations Head Start budget request their work is often cited. In this instance, public policy towards a child care program was influenced by research. Decisions about children's programs are often made to satisfy political concerns rather than on solid evidence that supports the fact that the program works for children.

Has Head Start escaped the Reagan budget ax? It has-at least for this year.

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